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Helsinki, 1880-1930

Ekholm, Laura Katarina

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Jews, second-hand trade and upward economic mobility: Introducing the ready-to-wear business in industrializing Helsinki, 1880–1930

Laura Katarina Ekholm 

Department of political and Economic Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
Postdoctoral researcher

ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of a ‘Jewish’ second-hand marketplace in Helsinki (1880–1930). This was a niche left for the Jews, who were not awarded civil rights in Finland before 1917. In utilizing a wide range of heterogeneous source material, I argue that the second-hand dealers introduced ready-made clothing to local consumer markets. The restrictions placed upon Jews provide a glimpse into the social status towards such products and trades. The article also highlights the tendency to deliberately undermine entrepreneurial success among Helsinki Jews in order to fit into the narrow social space that was historically designated to them.

KEYWORDS

Jews; second-hand trade; ready-to-wear; economic mobility; Helsinki

Introduction

This article combines the second-hand trade and the role of the Jews by looking at ready-to-wear markets in an industrialising Helsinki from the 1880s to the 1930s. Specifically, it examines the rise of supply in ready-to-wear clothing in Helsinki with a focus on the second-hand marketplace called Narinkka.¹ It was mainly the domain of a Jewish minority which was kept on the margins of society until the independence of Finland (1917).²

The Jewish marketplace has been portrayed in the popular memory and the local Jewish self-narrative as a form of pariah capitalism par excellence, a peculiar form of petty-trade. Yet strikingly, over a period of 50 years, the Jews of Finland faced a proverbial from-rags-to-riches-experience. Within a couple of generations, many of the Helsinki ‘cloth-Jews’ came to be known as the middle-class bourgeois of Helsinki. The starting point of this study is the contradiction between the ‘schmate’, the rag trade as a form of forced entrepreneurship composing an ethnic niche left for the Jews, and their striking, upward economic mobility. I argue that the introduction of the mass production of clothes in series was central in this process.

Scholars have long argued for the pivotal role of commercial recycling – to use the formulation of Miles Lambert for the development of ready-to-wear markets.³ The second-hand clothing was the first mode of buying ready-made garments at a time when

CONTACT Laura Katarina Ekholm  Laura.k.ekholm@helsinki.fi

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clothes were either made at home or custom-made by skilled tailors and seamstresses.⁴ Beverly Lemire has shown the crucial role of the second-hand trade for the European economy in different stages of industrialisation 'from scarcity to industrial plenty'. In each stage from the 17th to the mid-19th centuries, second-hand trade enabled consumption.⁵

The scholarship on cast-off trade, on the one hand, and the ready-to-wear business, on the other, focuses on the parts of Europe where industrialisation first commenced.⁶ Perhaps even half of Englishmen wore ready-to-wear by the end of the 1860s.⁷ It has been estimated that by the 1910s, ready-made had generally substituted custom-made clothing in the United States.⁸ By contrast, in the standard works, the breakthrough of the Finnish ready-to-wear manufacturing is generally dated to the interwar period.⁹ As I will show in this article, just a handful of Jewish families contributed crucially to this process.

The repairing, making and selling of clothing, both second-hand and new, has almost no barriers to entry. It was a typical start-up trade for many of the immigrants. What astonished contemporaries, and has been debated ever since, was the rapid upward economic and social mobility of Jews from Russian-dominated Eastern Europe upon emigrating to the West.¹⁰

In this broad dichotomy of 'east' and 'west', 19th century Finnish policy toward the Jews was decidedly eastern. Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy of Imperial Russia. The Jewish policy of 19th century Finland was, in principle, straightforward: no Jews were supposed to permanently reside in Finland. Jews in Finland could not choose their economic activities and their temporary residential bills included restrictions in terms of their means of gaining a livelihood.

The Jewish colony in Helsinki was a by-product of the Russian military reforms of the 1860s, after which Jews who had served in the military were allowed to stay in the region where they had completed their service. Hence, most Jewish families in Helsinki had some sort of connection to garment manufacturing and trade, and all of them had roots in Russian military service. Those who wished to stay in Finland, again in principle, were forced into livelihoods in the petty-trade, repairing and selling of used clothing.¹¹

The modern armies of the 19th century accelerated the demand for mass-produced men's wear. Military workshops were the first clusters of ready-to-wear factories. Ready-made uniforms were first introduced for military purposes, which were then applied and adapted to the production of civilian clothing.¹² Hence, Helsinki makes a case contributing to a set of questions on the interplay between ethnicity, the role of the military and the second-hand trade in the social and economic context of the changing demand and supply of the consumer markets in a growing urban milieu.

My research strategy is to analyse the functions and importance of Narinkka from the perspective of its different actors: the second-hand dealers, their customers, and the non-Jewish tailors and retailers. The aim of the article is to synthesise the remaining fragments of information on Narinkka to answer the following questions: What was the role of Jews in Helsinki clothing markets? How could Jews create a niche with economic advantage in such a limited scope for opportunities? What was the role of the military in this process? Why certain trades were seen as being suitable for Jews in late 19th century Finland provides a glimpse into the norms and social status towards such products and trades. This may help us to understand why the non-Jewish counterparts were so slow in doing what the Jewish second-hand dealers and their offspring did: recognise the increased consumer demand for ready-made clothing and put such products up for sale.

Methodological reflections and sources

A second-hand marketplace is often understood as the part of an informal economy operating in parallel to the world of prostitution, narcotics and stolen goods. The same applies to the case of the Jewish Narinkka in Helsinki. With regard to the context in which the marketplace is introduced in the historiography of the city, the second-hand marketplace is mentioned only in passing. It is, moreover, always mentioned in the context of urban poverty and, in most cases, as a static image of a bygone world in contrast to the fluctuating modern world. Apart from the list of rents paid for the city of Helsinki¹³ and a few documents filed in the Helsinki Jewish archive, Narinkka left behind little formal documentation. The same applies to the customers of the marketplace, the growing working class and soldiers from the nearby military garrisons. Parallel to Narinkka, the scholarship of Helsinki tends to ignore the presence of the Russian military and its impact on the city. Consequently, much of the analysis is deduced from a wide range of secondary sources.

The Finnish Jews are among the very few Eastern European Orthodox Jewish communities that were not destroyed in the Holocaust. Yet their extended family and business networks perished in the Shoah. The Soviet era had a further effect on the traces left by the Jewish businesses. Thus, the sources beyond the eastern border of Finland have proven elusive. Above all, the history has had an effect on what kind of attention the local Jewish community in Helsinki has paid to their entrepreneurial history. Many of the Holocaust survivors, Zionists or Communists alike, found the traditional position of Jews as a middleman minority despicable. This ideological stand has influenced the image of the economic life of a typical Jewish *shtetl*.¹⁴

The Helsinki Jews definitely had a similar attitude towards the economic life of Eastern European Jews. Generally, the Helsinki Jewish community was known for their Zionist sympathies.¹⁵ What is known of the Jewish second-hand trade is based primarily on a heterogeneous assortment of memoirs written by Jews as well as non-Jews. The ideological stand of the community elders has clearly affected the tone of discussion and history writing.

The methodological challenge is to set the different accounts on Narinkka that, in total, form a fragmentary body of research data into a context of rapid social change. For the men of the Jewish community who wrote about Narinkka, it uniquely symbolised oppression of times that had been left behind. Most of the Jewish authors in Helsinki had a negative stand on small-scale business. This image has been a prevalent part of the local Jewish collective memory.¹⁶ The ideas of what a life of Jewish families should have been like has probably influenced the stories. None of the memoirs' writers mentions, for example, that the local Jewish community campaigned and lobbied for decades for preserving the Narinkka marketplace when the city of Helsinki planned to close it in the 1920s.¹⁷ Hence, what is given in the parenthesis or remains unsaid is often as important as what is actually written about Narinkka and small-scale Jewish trade and business.

Although finding information on Narinkka is laborious, defining the members of the Helsinki Jewish community is not. All Jews who stayed in Finland before 1917 were connected to the Russian military, and all had to regularly apply for a renewed permission to stay in Finland. The way to settle in Helsinki was very controlled and limited. Thus, Helsinki had detailed sources on every Jewish person legally living in the country, including information on years spent in military service, the place of birth, marriages, the number of under-aged children and occupational status. There are inconsistencies in the sources concerning the

spelling of names, yet generally it is possible to follow and track the Jewish men and their families from the moment the service in the military was over until the end of their lives or, since many decided to migrate further to the West, until the date of their emigration.

For estimating the relative significance of the Narinkka marketplace, I will reconstruct the supply of clothing in late 19th century Helsinki. I use the trade directories to assemble a picture of what kinds of products were available and who sold them. Since the directories were never collected in any systematic fashion, they are by no means a reliable source for an exact number of tailors, seamstresses, retailers and wholesalers. Nevertheless, the trade directories reflect the supply of clothing in Helsinki – or as this article will show – the lack thereof.

A 'Jewish' business refers to the business of a member of the Helsinki Jewish community as defined in the registers compiled by the authorities and the Jewish congregation. Distinguishing the Jewish business-owners from the non-Jews is simple. We can find the Jewish names announced in the business directories.¹⁸ With the information on Jewish-owned companies it is possible to further consider the share of the Jewish business owners among the Helsinki-based textile and ready-to-wear manufacturers, retailers, wholesalers, tailors and seamstresses. There were some Christian individuals with a Jewish background, yet their firms are not involved in the analysis.

The way the business directories organised the compiled data varied as to how the different firms were presented and how much information they gave. Some volumes just list names of companies in alphabetical order under broad titles such as 'textile, garments, apparel manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers', while in other volumes the firms are classified in detail, distinguishing companies with hats on sale to companies with both hats and caps. Since the main interest here is the supply of ready-to-wear clothing and the share of the Jewish-owned companies, I have sorted out the ready-to-wear manufacturers and retailers, tailors, textile wholesalers and retailers, hats, caps and furriers. The firms present under several product categories in the directories are counted only once according to the foremost activity of the firm.

Success stories are always easier to find than the failures. Those Jewish men, moreover, who had the most successful business, had their birthdays published in the local newspapers, allowing for a consideration of their career paths. Needless to say, not all the Jews of Helsinki became wealthy and successful, yet the social position of Jews shapes the narration and gives much weight on the marginal social status and underrates the achievements in business. The Jewish-owned companies were understandably stated to operate in the fields of business allotted for them in all formal contexts.¹⁹ It is possible that some early Jewish businessmen undervalued their contribution on purpose, in order to fit the narrow social space allowed for the Jews.

Most public accounts by the Finnish Jews, such as the community periodicals, were written by men. Yet similar to the Jewish market squares of Eastern Europe,²⁰ and notions on the second-hand markets of early modern Western Europe,²¹ also in Helsinki, the marketplace was dominated by women. In the analysis below, I apply a simple method: I employ a family document commemorating Narinkka from the inside. In her unpublished genealogy, Miriam Seligson recounts the life of her grandmother Rebecka, née Radsevitsch (ca. 1857–1921).²² The life story of Rebecka Bensky, as recalled by her granddaughter, represents a typical life of a Jewish woman in 19th century Finland.

The author wrote the account based on extensive archival work for the succeeding generations. The chronicle includes elements that can be confirmed from other sources, revealing elements of Jewish second-hand trading practices in Helsinki. I first contrast the oral-history type of material on the Helsinki Jews with the data on the community, as derived from other sources. The life of Rebecka Bensky and her family is the starting point of the analysis.

The Jewish colony in a rapidly growing city

With her life story, Rebecka Bensky is representative of the mid-19th century Jewish life in Finland. She was born around 1857 to a Jewish soldier.²³ Since 1858, the Russian soldiers, their families and widowed wives were allowed to stay in Finland. The statute concerned did not take a stand on the ethnic background of the permitted soldiers but it was later confirmed by the Russian authorities that the right applied to the Jews.²⁴

The Jewish soldiers and their wives came from the Russian controlled parts of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. These areas were the homelands of the largest Jewish population in the pre-Holocaust world. They were subjects of Imperial Russia, and as Russian Jews, in principle, only allowed to reside in certain areas generally referred to as the Pale of Settlement.²⁵ Military service was one of a few ways of legally moving out of the Pale within the Russian empire.

No matter how much autonomy Finland had for implementing the terms of their own internal affairs, there was no way to prevent a small Jewish colony of former military personnel from settling in the country. The Finnish authorities set a decree in 1869 specifying the occupations allowed to Russian subjects staying in the country after finishing military service. The available means of gaining a livelihood included trade in tax-free products, whereas second-hand clothes and used shoes, along with other used goods and cheaper linen, scarves and hats, shoes, string, filament, needles, and other tawdry items would carry the same taxation rate as that of Finnish citizens.²⁶

Finland could not stop a small number of Jews setting in the country by the permission of the Russian military, yet the policy of Finland was to make life for the Jews as unbearable as possible. The local authorities did not hide their attempts to limit the number of Jews living in Finland to an utmost minimum. The major problem for Jewish families was the status of the children. The residential permits only applied to former soldiers, their wives and widows. According to the interpretation of the law by Finnish authorities, Jews born and raised in Finland had to leave the country upon coming of age.

Military service was a filter selecting those candidates who could legally stay in Finland. For the Jewish men, the choice was either to join the military or to emigrate. The Jewish daughters avoided deportation, if they married a Jewish soldier who had finished the service in Finland and thus redeemed the residential permit. This is what Rebecka Bensky's family chose to do. At the age of 15 years she married a significantly older, retired soldier, a divorcé from Vilnius by the family name of Bensky – and thus renewed her right to stay in Finland.²⁷

In striking contrast to the Scandinavian countries, where the Jews were given full civil rights between the 1850s and the 1870s the authorities did their best to avoid providing any possibilities for Jewish economic activities within the Finnish borders. This decidedly illiberal approach to the Jews collided with the general liberalisation of the Finnish economy

in the 1870s. In 1876 the Senate confirmed that the above mentioned trades were the sole ones permitted to the Jews, aiming to keep them on the fringes of the formal economy. Jews could only stay in three cities with a larger military garrison: Helsinki, Turku and Viborg.²⁸ Without civil rights, Jews were not permitted to hold governmental offices, nor own landed property. Furthermore, any purchase of a business including peddling outside the three cities was forbidden and could lead to deportation from the country. Certainly, there were peddlers of Jewish origin trading in the Finnish countryside, but this was illegal; those who wanted to keep their permit to stay in Finland took a great risk in continuing such activities. As late as 1889, the Finnish Senate introduced a new residence license to the Jews. It gave a temporary right to stay in Finland (for six months at a time) repeating the list of means of gaining a livelihood allowed for the Jews.²⁹

Retired soldiers and their families started up small businesses on these premises. The city of Helsinki especially designated Narinkka as the site for Jewish trade in the 1870s. The town of Turku also had its own version of Narinkka.³⁰ The Bensky made their living at Narinkka. The marketplace consisted of wooden market stalls rented out by the city of Helsinki.³¹ The Jewish life of Helsinki converged around the marketplace.

A local newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* called the marketplace in 1894 a Jewish Ghetto, and a stain on the reputation of Finland '(...) we have towards the end of the 19th century created a miniature version of the medieval Ghetto in our country, a "Jewish quarter" of a kind that is not to be found among the nations of Western culture.'³²

There were occasionally rumours mentioning stolen goods connected to the Jewish marketplace, yet generally Narinkka seemed to lack all the connotations to criminality often attached to second-hand markets. The Jewish community was alert to avoid drawing any



Figure 1. Photographed by Roos in 1929. The archives of the City Museum of Helsinki. 'The often-shown pictures taken of Narinkka were part of a conscious project to document the part of Helsinki that was about to vanish into history.

negative attention. An attempt to sell stolen goods by one broker could have caused trouble for the entire community.

The Jewish colony was connected to the nearby Russian military garrisons. The Governor's list for 1915 reported 54 Jews as 'narinkka vendors'.³³ The marketplace had 28 individual stalls and 30 row shops in the halls.³⁴ Not all vendors at the second-hand marketplace were Jews. About one-fifth of those with rented slots had Russian or Finnish names without any connections to the Jewish community.³⁵

By the same token, not all Jews traded at Narinkka. There were musicians serving in the army, medical doctors, military tailors, mechanics and other skilled workers and merchants supplying the army. Nonetheless, all families had a connection to the military base, including occasionally even the rabbi because the military guaranteed religious services for the Jews.³⁶

Manufacturing on the larger scale was not allowed for the Jews; but this only applied to the Finnish market. Just like the special permission to live in Finland, guaranteed by the Russian military, orders from the Imperial Army could not be forbidden by the local Finnish authorities.

Around 1900 the authorities in Finland generally accepted the small number of Jews who were born in Finland. The restrictions were never dropped until Finland's independence – the subject was discussed from the 1870s – yet strict observance of the regulations were no longer practised on the local level. The city of Helsinki donated a site for the Jewish community and the synagogue was inaugurated in 1906.³⁷

The number of Jews in Finland kept rising, albeit slowly (Table 1). In other words, during the active years of Rebecka Bensky, the growth of the community was modest while the surrounding city had more than quadrupled in size. When Rebecka started her trading activities, Narinkka was located near the Russian military barracks and training field on the outskirts of Helsinki. By the time she retired its location was in practice right in the city centre.

The growth of Helsinki did not just refer to its number of inhabitants. The economy grew as well. In the decades between 1860 and 1914, the Finnish economy grew at a faster rate than the European average.³⁸ Finland was still extremely poor compared to Western Europe, yet the material living-standards of the workers in Helsinki were improving.³⁹ Consumption must have led to a constant increase in demand for suits and outfits.

Over the same period, other major social changes shaped Helsinki. As a young wife, Rebecka Bensky moved to a town with a certain linguistic and religious diversity not associated with Finland in later decades. One-fifth of the merchants in the mid-19th century Helsinki had names either of Russian or of northern German origin.⁴⁰

Most of the new inhabitants were workers from the predominantly Finnish-speaking countryside. By the 1910s the most-spoken language in Helsinki and the ethnicity of most names in the business directories were Finnish. Consequently, the Jewish community, with

Table 1. The population of Helsinki and the Jewish community in 1880, 1915 and 1930.

	1880	1915	1930
The Helsinki Jewish community	441	894	1,132
The population of Helsinki	43,000	176,500	241,000
The share of the Jews in Helsinki, %	1.03	0.51	0.47

Sources: OSF: Recensement de la population de Helsingfors 1880, table 11, OSF: Population 1915, 15; OSF Mouvement de la population en 1930, 22; Uudenmaan läänin kuvernöörin Senaatin Siivitoimituskunnalle laatima luettelo Uudenmaan läänissä asuvista juutalaisista [The Governor's report for the Civil Department of the Senate with a list for Jews living in Uusimaa county], He1, The National Archives of Finland.

their stores located near one another along the streets with the best public transportation lines and with Narinkka, had a more visible role in the urban milieu as suggested by the above numbers.

Urban poverty and upward economic mobility

One constant theme in the accounts written by non-Jewish authors on the Jews of Helsinki in the 19th century is the penury of the community; Helsinki Jews belonged to the sphere of urban poverty: 'the economic standards and living conditions of the poor Helsinki Jews were that of a urban proletariat'.⁴¹ The synagogue of the 1880s was said to be as 'poor and needy' as the entire congregation.⁴²

Narinkka, *der yidisher mark* in Yiddish, comes up in the texts written by Helsinki Jews as a kind of folklore.⁴³ Narinkka had a different meaning for the Jews, who sold their goods, as well as for their (non-Jewish) customers. The way Narinkka is portrayed corresponds well with trades which anthropologist Antony Blok calls infamous' or 'pariah occupations'.⁴⁴ These were domains open or specified for social outcasts and ethnic minorities.

Within most memoirs of the past Helsinki, Narinkka had an exotic flavour of 'orientalism' about it.⁴⁵ Jews are connected not only to the other side of a class boundary, but also as representing complete otherness and strangeness. One gentile woman recalls visits to the park in her childhood in the 1890s: [In addition to newspaper sales] 'A business of another type took place on the streets of Helsinki without any hullabaloo, yet insistent: "Ma'am has any used clothes?" (...). Most often these Jewish women were on the Esplanade, one was least safe from them on the benches there. As youths we found it so awful to be addressed like that on the street, and I was personally afraid of them and their black, glowing eyes'⁴⁶

Another woman recalls a Narinkka merchant-woman that used to come to buy clothes from their home: She [unlike other peddlers] came through the main door and rang the doorbell:

We called her the Jew-Granny [...]. She was one of those Jews who collected used clothes, bought children's worn and used adult garments, repaired them, and sold them further for a good price. Her store was one of the stalls in the Kamppi square. This place was called 'Narinkka'. The place where the stalls were located was fenced like the souks of the Arabs. This peddler spoke some kind of *judendeutsch*, 'Yiddish-Deutsch', and walked in asking: 'Haben Sie was, gut Frau?'. If mother was unsure, she would assure: 'Na suchen Sie mahl, gut Frau': Mamma found a rag and the haggling started. To get rid of her, Mamma sold the suit for 25 pennies although she had initially asked for one markka, and was decisive that she had nothing else.⁴⁷

Rebecka Bensky was undoubtedly one of the Jews living in the conditions of the urban proletariat. The family had seven children, two of whom died in infancy. In 1891, at the age of 33 years, Rebecka was widowed and left alone with five young children. She continued to work at the marketplace. After a second short marriage that ended in divorce, she married for a third time, this time to a Polish-Jewish soldier, who had lost his wife in 1900 and had two small children.⁴⁸ The couple had two more children together. Altogether Rebecka raised nine children while earning her living at Narinkka.

The childhood of Rebecka's eldest and youngest daughters reflected the change in the family's fortunes and the rise in living standards. The oldest daughter Anna was born in 1877.

She grew up in a rented one-bedroom and a kitchen apartment with her parents, siblings, and a maid.⁴⁹ Later on when she married – again to a Jewish soldier from Vitebsk, her husband and their new-born daughter also lived in the two-room rented apartment.⁵⁰

In quite a different childhood, Rebecka's youngest daughter Vera, born in 1903, from Rebecka's third marriage, grew up in an apartment with three rooms and a kitchen. Rebecka now owned the apartment herself. Instead of helping at the family stall in Narinkka, Vera stayed at home and took private piano lessons.⁵¹

In a striking contrast to the dominant narrative of Narinkka, notable upward economic mobility, with parallels to Jewish experience in Central and Western Europe, took place among the Finnish Jews. Swedish, being the language of the middle and upper classes, soon became the predominant language of the community.⁵² The family size dropped, the children were educated and, more often, women were stay-at-home mothers although many still had a primary role within the family businesses. The wealthier Jewish families in Helsinki had the life-style of the European Jewish bourgeois with visits to spas, homes in the modern new apartment buildings, piano lessons, bridge and tennis.⁵³

The role of Narinkka as consumer market

How could a woman like Rebecka Bensky carry out such an upward turn in her economic mobility in turn-of-the-century Helsinki by selling cast-off clothing? The family story gives credit to Rebecka's thrift, but it also reveals the inner workings of the Narinkka trade: Rebecka managed quite well in her later years, because, as it is explained, 'she ran a small-scale banking business.'⁵⁴ Rebecka, together with other Narinkka vendors, accepted pawned goods from people in immediate need of money. While working at Narinkka as a young widow, she also developed the business into ready-made suits.⁵⁵

Both activities are congruent with the literature on early consumer markets in other parts of Europe. Before the rise of the consumer markets of cheap clothing retailers, second-hand trade was the 'fast fashion' of clothing for workers and ordinary people.⁵⁶ The customers of second-hand markets were also people with little or no access to formal credit markets. Textiles and clothes were often the most valuable possession that people had. For the ordinary people, textile products were often the only asset that could be easily converted into cash.⁵⁷ Due to factory production, the prices of textiles fell considerably. Pernilla Jonsson and Kristina Lilja have analysed the value of clothes as a means of credit by studying the prices of second-hand clothing in the auctions in Sweden.⁵⁸ According to the analysis, prices fell during the 19th century, but clothes still held considerable value. While the income gap between Finland and Sweden grew in the 19th century, we can assume that garments in Finland formed at least as important a part of what people owned as they did in Sweden.

Nevertheless, pawning, buying, repairing and selling cast-off clothing alone cannot explain the accumulation among (some of) the Jewish merchants. None of the above is sufficient to explain Rebecka Bensky's ability to raise the living standards of the growing family.

Trade with second-hand goods has practically no barriers to entry and is one of the persistent forms of an informal economy. If trading with cast-off clothing alone could raise one's living standards, there would have been no poverty in Helsinki, let alone any other growing city.

The pawning and hawking of cast-off clothing and the informal exchange of credit and cash binds Narinkka trade to the early modern world, where clothes were inherited, sometimes stolen, repaired and resold.⁵⁹ The note in the memoir about Rebecka's other small innovation – imported clothes from St Petersburg – rather indicates a completely new form of textile and clothing business. Anecdotal evidence supporting this notion comes up in the literature on the history of Helsinki as well as the history of the Jews of Helsinki: the Narinkka traders blurred the boundaries between used clothes and new products.⁶⁰

This bears asking: what was the supply of reasonably priced clothing in Helsinki beyond Narinkka. Where else could people buy clothing from in industrialising Helsinki?

The supply of ready-made clothing is derived from a sample of business directories from 1883, 1887, 1895 and 1898. As stated above, the directories provide a scattered evidence of the market. The directory of 1883, for example, omits all female milliners, meaning that the total numbers are not comparable between 1883 and 1887. Some of the tailors or stores were stated to have been in the markets years before appearing in the pages of the directories. Categories between tailors and merchants were fluid. For this reason, distinguishing between artisans or merchants is somewhat arbitrary.

Nevertheless, the directories reflect trends and changes in the markets even though the results must be treated with caution. In Helsinki, the manufacturing enterprises were rather small consumer goods manufactories – some aiming at the lucrative markets of St Petersburg. Large textile mills were located elsewhere in the country.⁶¹

Helsinki was the commercial centre and what could not be found in Helsinki, was hardly available in other towns of Finland either. Helsinki had agents for sewing machines, imported textiles, as well as those selling Finnish textile products. There was one department store, Stockmann, established in 1862, but it did not have a garment department until the 1930s.⁶²

In 1884 there were no stores listed as selling ready-to-wear. Between 1887 and 1898 there seemed to be very few merchants supplying cheaper, ready-made clothes (Table 2). A few of the tailors were listed as having ready-made suits in the store.⁶³

Altogether, the supply of garment-related products as represented in the trade directories did not seem to keep pace with the growth of the city. The number of tailors and furriers in the business directories was growing slowly, but hardly enough for supplying the increased demand for outfits that must have followed due to the growth rate of the city. The supply of clothing in Helsinki was based on skilled bespoke production and small-scale manufacturing. What seemed to be lacking was clothes' dealers or clothes' retailing shops selling reasonably priced clothing. Hence, Narinkka must have been an essential resource for the

Table 2. Number of textile and garment merchants and artisans in the Business directories for Helsinki in selected years and population of Helsinki (1883–1898).

Textiles, yarns	4	14	29	44
Shirts, corsets, underwear	3	6	14	13
Hats and furs	6	7	14	14
Milliners	Na	17	25	23
Tailors	24	43	70	60
Ready-made clothing	Na	3	6	9
Total	37	90	158	163
Population of Helsinki (in thousands)	43	51	75	80

Sources: Finlands Handels-kalender af Victor Forselius for 1883, 1887, 1895, and 1898.

new inhabitants, who were mostly workers from the countryside packing into the same quarters where Helsinki Jews and other urban poor were said to live.⁶⁴ In a northern town like Helsinki, finding warm winter clothes was not a matter of consumption preferences but a must. Above all, it was one of the very few places where one could walk in and look at the low-priced products without obligations to buy anything.

If we look at the supply of clothing in late-19th century Helsinki, bearing in mind the increasing number of workers, who were moving into the city, the anecdotal evidence that Jews at Narinkka started to import ready-to-wear products from St Petersburg appears in a new light. It is one thing – and not unusual in the world of second-hand trade – to mix new products with used products. It is yet another thing to be among the very first ones to introduce this innovation to growing consumer markets.

Capturing a market niche

The first Jewish tailor, Weintraub, appeared in the business directories from 1987.⁶⁵ In 1898, three ready-to-wear sellers, one hat factory owner and two tailors were Jewish.⁶⁶

These were now registered firms, which can be traced in the Finnish Trade Register. The files of the pre-1918 companies sometimes include a paragraph made using a different kind of a pencil, adding that the purpose of the company was ‘to sell used clothes and similar activities’. In these entries, ‘used clothes’ has been added later to be on the safe side.⁶⁷

Since Jews were only permitted to make a living by small-scale trade with a limited range of choice, they registered their businesses as a second-hand dealer, regardless of the type of business they were engaged with in reality.

In practice, most of the second-generation Jewish families of the 1890s and 1900s were engaged with the clothing trade. Yet they no longer did this at Narinkka but, rather, in their own shops along the shopping streets, or by ready-to-wear manufacturing.

In 1909, the opening of a non-Jewish ready-to-wear store had news value in Helsinki. The article of the Business bulletin *Kauppa-lehti* (May 12, 1909) also explains why Finns, thus far, had to buy such goods from the Jews:

It is true that they [the Jews] have inborn qualifications for fraud, and they indeed have gained their practical training in those ambiguous Narinkka stands, the customer knows that the cheap prices are a trick, yet the lack of any domestic [that is non-Jewish] options makes one visit these stores anyway. A ready-made suit is always a more economical alternative than that of a tailor-made suit – and where else could one buy [it] if not from the Jews, because the tailors only keep a limited selection on sale. Their warehouses especially lack clothes for women and children. (...) ⁶⁸

In the early 1900s, the main shopping streets of Helsinki had Jewish-owned stores opened side-by-side. Some of them were small and modest, but the most successful definitely belonged to the most notable ones, which bore importance for the development of the Finnish garment industry and trade. Considering how few Jewish families there were in Helsinki, they were well represented among the manufacturers by the beginning of the 20th century.

The business directory of 1913 announced 25 stores selling ready-to-wear products, of which 20 firms were Jewish-owned. These numbers do not include the trade on the Narinkka marketplace.

Table 3. Textiles, garments, ready-to-wear and accessories in Helsinki in the Business directory for 1913.

Product group	Number of firms in selected categories	'Jewish firms'	%
Ready-to-wear	25	20	80.0
Custom-made bespoke tailoring	80	1	1.3
Textiles, yarns	88	0	0.0
Hats and caps (manufacturers and retailers)	24	3	12.5
Furs (Manufacturers and retailers)	5	1	20.0
Total	222	25	11.3

Source: Mercators handels- och industrikalender 1913–1914, 'Branch section', 381–752.

Why were the non-Jewish counterparts so slow in doing what the Jewish second-hand dealers and their offspring did? Why did they not notice the increased consumer demand for ready-made clothing and provide for such products on sale? If explaining how an entrepreneurial innovation is born is challenging, it is nearly impossible to determine why and how business opportunities are missed.

The manufacturing census of Finland draws attention to the contemporary social position given towards the dress trades and manufacturing. How data and material is organised reflects what has been considered important and worth nothing, but the given classification also reflects the understanding between relations and hierarchies. Before the industrial mass production of clothing, ready-to-wear referred to the small scale production of ready-made stocks by an artisan.⁶⁹

The title of the products of the ready-to-wear industry in the Finnish census from 1884 to 1908 manifests relics of the cultural position of dress-making; The census contained 13 'sections' divided further into classes and subclasses. The textile industry occupied class 7. This was a category with the large wool and cotton mills that were among the most dynamic and fastest growing industry of late-19th century Finland. The cotton mills were the second largest industrial employer after saw mills.⁷⁰ Also hosiery and stockings were considered as textile manufacturing. Tailoring, shirts, hats, caps, accessories were, in contrast, treated as completely different products. These belonged to the class category titled as 'garments and cleaning manufacturing'. Shirt factories, tailors, hat-making firms, furriers and shoemakers were considered to belong to the same class category as barbers, public baths and cleaning.⁷¹ It was only since the reclassification of the Manufacturing census statistics in 1909 that textile and garment manufacturing were combined to successive industrial categories of textile industry (with wool and cotton mills) and garment manufactories.⁷²

The skilled tailors and dressmakers, and most likely many of their customers, associated ready-made garments with the rag trade, poor quality and the lower classes. The ready-made suits, cloaks and dresses were not considered as respectable forms of clothing but, rather, as a substitute for second-hand clothing: both were products that can be bought 'off-the-rack' instead of the sell-and-make type of products of bespoke tailoring.⁷³ With this mindset, ready-made clothing was not considered a part of the modern industrial world but, rather, considered a by-product of cast-off goods, a little extra income for widowed women making a living in cloth selling.

There was another main stimulus of ready-to-wear clothing, which does not appear in any Finnish manufacturing census: the demand for mass-scale clothing of the Russian military outfitting. The early manufacturing censuses did not take into account the production of goods demanded by the military stationed in Finland.⁷⁴

Table 4. Number of ready-to-wear retailers, wholesalers, textile and garment merchants and artisans in the Business directories for Helsinki in 1920 and 1929, and the share of the Jewish-owned companies.

Product group	Number of firms in selected categories (1920)	'Jewish firms'	%	Number of firms in selected categories (1929)	'Jewish firms'	%
Textiles, yarns (wholesalers and retailers)	76	3	4	176	25	14
Ready-to-wear	25	11	44	122	35	29
Custom-made bespoke tailoring	30	3	10	75	7	9
Hats and caps (manufacturers and retailers)	12	5	42	30	5	17
Furs (Manufacturers and retailers)	7	3	43	20	5	25
Total	150	25	17	423	52	12

Sources: Mercators handels- och industrikalender 1920, 361–658; Finlands Handels kalender 1929, 105–232.

Herein were the origins of the transformation from the rag trade into wealthy textile merchants and factory owners. Military workshops were the first clusters of ready-to-wear manufacturing producers. Returning once more to the story of Rebecka Bensky, at the age of 20 years, her daughter Anna married a permitted Jewish soldier, Moses Smolensky (born in Belarus, in 1875).⁷⁵ The young couple no longer worked at Narinkka. Instead, Smolensky worked at Seligson's tailoring which had developed into 'a Jewish military tailor industry'. Isak Seligson (born in 1844 in Latvia) was a military master tailor, who produced uniforms for the officers in the Russian military.⁷⁶

Laurence Fontaine has demonstrated, in her work on peddlers and other transient communities, how economic status varied. It is often a mistake to confuse a marginal social status with a low economic status.⁷⁷ For skilled Jews in Finland, the Imperial Russian army could provide careers as suppliers, military tailors, and other skilled artisans, who served the military base.⁷⁸ The social status of such professional craftsmen and suppliers was not necessarily higher than the lower rank soldiers, but the economic prospects certainly had more potential.

In the tax unit list for the City of Helsinki in 1913, among the 75 largest companies measured by their tax unit, four were owned by Helsinki Jews: M. Skurnik, Pergament & Rung, Pergament & Linder and S.S. Strascheffskij.⁷⁹ The owners of the businesses appeared among the highest taxed men of Finland in 1916.⁸⁰ Some of these names can further be tracked to the most prestigious addresses of art-nouveau villas, built in the most appreciated districts of the city in the early 20th century.⁸¹

The life paths of these Jewish military suppliers explain the astonishing change from the second-hand trade to the highest tax payers of the country. Jehuda Pergament, born as a soldier's son in Turku (Åbo) in 1863, opened a wholesale business in 1893. He supplied military and civilian uniforms for over 50 years, first for the Imperial Russian army, later for the Republic of Finland, especially for the Maritime Administration.⁸²

In 1917, after Finland's independence and the end of the First World War, the Russian military garrisons were closed. Moreover, the transition to an independent Finland provided no radical change for these Jewish-owned military manufactories. During the Finnish Civil War (1918), some of the larger military suppliers continued their business with the Finnish army, supplying the side of the Whites in the civil war. Gumples *Finlands militär ekipering* [The military outfitter of Finland], for example, originally started up in 1902 and, in the beginning, produced uniforms in modest quantities. These orders grew, notably during the First World War. After the independence of Finland, the company continued to produce uniforms, but now for the Finnish state and civil guard.⁸³

After the First World War and Finland's independence the share of the Jews decreased. In 1920, a total of 25 firms could be defined as selling ready-to-wear clothing. The number of Jewish-owned firms among these companies had dropped to 11 firms (Table 4).

By the time Narinkka was closed in 1930, there were 423 companies in the categories of 'garment wholesale and retail, furs, hats, accessories, and textiles', according to the Trade directory for 1929. Some of the Jewish firms had developed into notable textile wholesalers and bespoke fur ateliers. Of those selling ready-to-wear clothing, 35 firms can be recognised as 'Jewish'. The Jewish community was so small that the Jews could by no means 'dominate' the Helsinki clothing market, yet notably many of the stores in the 'garment districts' of the interwar Helsinki were Jewish owned. Narinkka soon transformed into a symbol of bygone times when Jews were social outcasts without civil rights in Finland.

Conclusion: introducing the ready-to-wear in Helsinki

The main argument of this article is simple: the mainly Jewish dealers of Narinkka represent the early stages of the modern garment industry in the industrialising phase of Helsinki. Since most of the new inhabitants were working-class men and women from the countryside with little or no purchasing power, there must have been a constant demand for cheap clothing. Helsinki was an expanding city with unavoidably undeveloped consumer markets. Analysing the business directories, the supply side did not seem to quite follow the growth rates of the city. Cheap ready-made suits, working clothes and outfits were not generally available in the stores of Helsinki at the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries.

The rise of the modern garment industry with standard-sized ready-to-wear clothing is inevitably one of the markers of a modern, industrialised consumer society. The role reserved for Narinkka has, in contrast, been an antithesis of modernity: a static relic of the past, frozen in time.

The legal frame, within which the Jewish Narinkka trade originally formed, partly accounts for this interpretation. Until 1918, Finland's restrictive Jewish policy was strikingly outdated when compared to legislation in the Scandinavian countries and in Western Europe. The official policy of 19th century Finland was to limit the number of Jews living in the country. All Jews had a link to the Imperial Russian army. Beyond the army, their options for gaining a livelihood were restricted to small-scale trade such as cast-off clothes. Narinkka became a particular Jewish enclave.

Notwithstanding this, how could a little colony of former soldiers, their wives and children fill a gap between the growing demand and the limited supply of cheap clothing? Jewish tailors working for the Imperial Russian garrisons had direct access to the large demands made by the military. The owners of clothing firms and industrialists producing for the military were easily found to be among the most important ones in Finland. Despite their low social status as 'cloth-Jews', some families experienced significant, upward economic mobility. Coming from the poverty-driven working-class districts, these families achieved the middle-class status of the Helsinki bourgeois. How is one to comprehend the inconsistency between the marginal social status allocated to these Jews and the eventual outcome?

In memoirs, the story is staged as an insignificant happenstance, with at most a marginal role in the local history. Quite understandably, concepts such as entrepreneurial success implied contradictions for the Jews of Helsinki. The stress has lain on the narrow social

position reserved for those Jewish families, who were allowed to stay in Finland. By the 1930s when the marketplace was finally dismantled, the trade was seen as a part of a bygone world, both in terms of the trade itself as well as in terms of the Jewish policy of the Imperial Russian era. Indeed, since the number of Jews in Helsinki remained nearly insignificant, while the city around the community grew rapidly, the visible role of the Jews in the clothing business gradually decreased.

In a scholarly context, both the second-hand trade and the role of the Jews in Helsinki, appear as a part of a broader pattern. Helsinki and its Jewish marketplace appears more as a specific version of the development that has been recollected in the Western European contexts, albeit on a miniature scale and belated, as compared to the 19th century industrial nations. When looking at the history of the development of the modern garment industries, specific features can be found in Helsinki: the blurring of used and new clothes, and large-scale orders from the military. The role of the Narinkka marketplace in modernizing the Finnish ready-to-wear trade implies another question: Why was this trade specifically left as an ethnic niche for the Jews?

I argue that the very restrictions placed upon Jews provides a glimpse into the norms and social status towards such products and trades in late 19th century Finland. The Narinkka-type of “rag” trade was generally considered with profound contempt. Jews were pushed toward the clothing trade, because it was not seen as a competitive field of economic livelihood. This may help us to understand why the non-Jewish counterparts were so slow in recognizing the increased consumer demand for ready-made clothing and in putting such products up for sale.

Today second-hand trade is understood as a form of recycling. Before the era of mass-produced clothing, textiles and garments were used as a medium of exchange for people outside the credit markets. By blurring new, ready-made clothes with the cast-off goods, they filled a commercial gap between the growing demand for and scanty supply of reasonably priced clothing in a rapidly growing urban milieu.

In this context, the Jewish widows, selling used clothes may no longer appear as the passive objects of the measures imposed upon them. Rather, one witnesses, instead, entrepreneurs with agency, introducing a new product to the markets – factory-made, standard-sized clothing. The blurring of ready-to-wear with used clothes at Narinkka can thus be seen from two perspectives: on the one hand, it was about an age-old occupation within the boundaries of the formal and informal economy; yet at the same time, the women selling cheap ready-made clothing introduced a new product, the forerunner of the mass-produced fashion industry. Simultaneously, the idea of second-hand as a petty trade usually belonging to the sphere of the early-modern world is updated to 19th-century industrialising Europe.

Notes

1. In Swedish, which was then the dominant language of Helsinki, Narinken. The name is directly derived from Russian *na rynke* – meaning literally ‘on the market’. For example, the 1966 Thesaurus entry for the Finnish word Narinkka describes it as a market site, either a market house or a marketplace with wooden stalls, where peddlers sell second-hand clothing and other cast-off goods. *Nykysuomen sanakirja*, 626–627.
2. The debate on Jewish civil rights in Finland started in the 1870s, but it did not result in any changes until the early 1900s. For more details, see, Ekholm, *Boundaries*, 53–59.
3. Lambert, “Cast-Off Wearing Apparell”, 1.

4. Green, *Ready-to-wear, Ready-to-work*, 21.
5. Lemire, "The Secondhand Clothing", 157.
6. Lemire, "Peddling Fashion"; Fontaine, Laurence (ed.). *Alternative Exchanges*; Godley, "The Development"; Green, *Ready-to-Wear – Ready-to-Work*.
7. Chapman, "The Innovating Entrepreneurs", 22.
8. Godley, "British and American Clothing Industries", 71.
9. Ahvenainen, and Kuusterä, "Teollisuus ja rakennustoiminta", 254.
10. Kuznets, "Economic Structure"; Godley, *Jewish Immigrant Entrepreneurship*; Mendelsohn, *The Rag Race*; Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*; Green, *Ready-to-wear – Ready-to-Work*.
11. On the literature concerning the Finnish-Jewish history, Ekholm, Muir, and Silvennoinen, "Linguistic, cultural and history-related Studies".
12. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work*, 29–31.
13. Helsinki City Archives, Narinkahyror 1918–1930. Rahatoimisto Gy:21.
14. Eliach, *There Once was a World*, 10–11.
15. Ekholm, and Muir, "Name Changes", 176.
16. See for example, Jacobsson, *Taistelu ihmisoikeuksista*; Weinstein, *Minneskrift*, 5.
17. Narinkka-kysymys 1929–1930, 167, The Archive of the Finnish Jews, The National Archives of Finland.
18. *Judisk årsbok för Finland*; of the Jewish family names in Helsinki, see Ekholm, and Muir, "Name Changes".
19. Ekholm, *Boundaries*, 94.
20. Eliach, *There Once Was a World*, 270–271.
21. Lemire, "The secondhand clothing trade", 152.
22. Seligson, "Vi".
23. *Meliza's Genealogy*, 'Rebecka Radsevitsh'. www.amitys.com. (Accessed July 27, 2017).
24. Ekholm, *Boundaries*, 49–50.
25. The Pale refers to the areas consisting of what today are parts of Poland, Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine in which Jews were allowed to legally reside, Klier, "Pale of Settlement". (Accessed December 21, 2017).
26. Decree 17, Helsingfors, June 30, 1869. *Storfurstendömet Finlands Författningssamling för 1869*.
27. Seligson, "Vi", 56.
28. Muir, *Yiddish in Helsinki*, 19–29.
29. Ekholm, *Boundaries*, 53–59; Fenno-Judaica, ['Medborgerliga rättigheter'].
30. Wassholm, "Handel i marginalen".
31. It was first located in Nikolai Street near the city centre. Hertzberg, *Helsinki herra Hertzbergin silmin*, 152–154.
32. Translated by the author. "Narinken" (*Hufvudstadsbladet* 18 August, 1894). Finland was seeking international acknowledgement during the final years of Imperial Russia and the way the Jews were treated was troublesome for this cause.
33. Uudenmaan läänin kuvernöörin Senaatin Siivilitoimituskunnalle laatima luettelo Uudenmaan läänissä asuvista juutalaisista [The Governor's report for the Civil Department of the Senate with a list for Jews living in Uusimaa county], He1, The National Archives of Finland.
34. Narinkahyror 1918–1930, Gy:21, The Helsinki City Archives.
35. Narinkka-kysymys 1929–1930, 167, The Archive of the Finnish Jews, The National Archives of Finland.
36. Ekholm, *Boundaries*, 69–76.
37. Ekholm, *Boundaries*, 53–59.
38. Hjerpe, *The Finnish economy*, 50–51.
39. Heikkinen, "Major necessities".
40. Alongside the most important merchant houses of Russian origin were merchants from Lübeck. These families easily integrated with the Swedish-speaking bourgeoisie and were often naturalized and absorbed into the local ruling class. Wolff, "Elitinvandring och kosmopolitism".
41. Åström, *Samhällsplanering och regionbildning*, 279.

42. Hertzberg, *Helsinki herra Hertzbergin silmin*, 152–154. Up until 1906 the synagogue was located in rented properties.
43. Muir, “Jac Weinsteinin Jiddiŝinkielinen revvy”, 145–146.
44. Blok, *Honor and Violence*, 44–66.
45. Åström, *Stadsamhällets omdaning*, 39.
46. Translated by the author. Lüscher, “Barndomsintryck”, 62.
47. Translated by the author. Ahde-Kjälman, *Kotini vuosisadan lopun Helsingissä*, 93–94.
48. Seligson, “Vi”, 87.
49. Seligson, “Vi”, 70.
50. Seligson, “Vi”, 108.
51. Seligson, “Vi”, 81–84.
52. Muir, *Yiddish in Helsinki*, 6–7.
53. Ekholm, *Boundaries*, 89, 105; Ekholm, and Muir, “Name Changes and Visions”, 176.
54. Seligson, “Vi”, 88.
55. Seligson, “Vi”, 82; 88.
56. Charpy, “The Scope and Structure”.
57. Fontaine, “The Exchange of Second-hand Goods”, 99.
58. Jonsson and Lilja, “Strategier för krediter”.
59. Fontaine, “The Exchange of Second-hand Goods”; Lemire, “The Secondhand Clothing Trade”, 153.
60. Hertzberg, *Helsinki herra Hertzbergin silmin*, 152–154; Jacobsson, *Taistelu ihmisoikeuksista*, 104.
61. *Industri-Statistik 1884: Teollisuustilasto: Tehtaita ja käsityölaitoksia 1884–1908*.
62. Damstén, *Stockmann genom hundra år*, 127.
63. For instance, [non-Jewish] *Stude* (est. 1880) and *Rintala* (est. 1879).
64. Åström, *Samhällsplanering och regionsbildning*, 279.
65. *Finlands Handels-kalender 1887*, 39.
66. *Finlands Handels-kalender 1898*, Pergament (est.1882), Seligson, Katsman & Leffkowitzsch, Rubinstein, Skurnik.
67. Helsinki, Public trade registers by the National Board of Patents and Registers, by the name of the owner, The National Archives of Finland.
68. *Kauppalehti* was a Finnish language newspaper with an emphasis on business and economics that regularly published articles on the role of the Jews in the economic life of Europe.
69. Wottle, “Opposing Prêt-à-Porter”, 25.
70. *Industri-Statistik 1884: Teollisuustilasto: Tehtaita ja käsityölaitoksia. Jälkimmäinen osa 1884*, 10.
71. *Industri-Statistik 1884: Teollisuustilasto: Tehtaita ja käsityölaitoksia: 1884*.
72. *Industri-Statistik 1884: Teollisuustilasto 1909*.
73. Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work*, 21.
74. *Industri-Statistik 1884: Teollisuustilasto: Tehtaita ja käsityölaitoksia 1884*, II.
75. Seligson, “Vi”, 99; Meliza’s Genealogy. www.amitys.com. Accessed December 7, 2017.
76. Seligson, “Vi”, 167–168.
77. Fontaine, *History of Pedlars*, 201–204.
78. Ekholm, *Boundaries*, 50.
79. Kovero, “Helsinki liikekeskuksena”, 337–342.
80. ‘Skurnik’, ‘Rung’, ‘Pergament’, ‘Rubinstein’, ‘Kotschack’ and ‘Gumpler’, Suostuntaverojen kantokirjat (1916) [Appropriation taxes], Lääninhallitus, läänien revidoitujen tilien arkisto, The National Archives of Finland. Courtesy of Petri Roikonen.
81. Nenonen & Toppari, *Herrasväen ja työläisten kaupunki*, 27–28; 35–36.
82. ‘Pergament, Jehuda’, biografiska avdelningen, Brages Pressarkiv.
83. ‘Gumpler, Moses’, biografiska avdelningen, Brages Pressarkiv.

ORCID

Laura Katarina Ekholm  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8282-3163>

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